

Dear Neighbor,

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your representative to the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors for the third district. I will do my best to keep you regularly informed about my work on the County Board and the proceedings of Milwaukee County government.

My 14 years in the Wisconsin Legislature prepared me for how government works, but I have been surprised by the differences between these two government bodies. In particular, I was not expecting to see the poor financial state that Milwaukee County government is in. The County is in a difficult position where we have to make tough choices that cannot be pushed off any longer.

When I was elected to the County Board in April, I was appointed to three committees: Finance and Audit, Intergovernmental Relations, and the Parks, Energy and Environment committee. Chairman Lipscomb appointed me Vice Chair of Finance, a seven-member committee that takes the County Executive's recommended budget, analyzes it, and makes changes. It is considered the most important committee to serve on, and one learns how Milwaukee County government truly works. It has been an eye-opening experience and I would like to share with you what I have learned.

An especially challenging component of the County's budget is dealing with legacy costs that stem in large part from the [county pension scandal](#) that dates back to the early 2000's. The pension scandal, the result of bad advice and improper accounting by an outside firm, ended up costing Milwaukee nearly \$900 million, and continues to haunt us to this day. The excessive costs created a structural imbalance between expenditures and revenue.

These legacy costs hurt our ability to deal with our obligations to our constituents, like funding a public transportation system that is critical to our economy, essential health human services, and cultural institutions and parks that make Milwaukee County a place where people want to live, work, and locate new businesses.

In addition to our legacy costs, we also have to deal with nearly \$250 million in deferred maintenance costs for our parks system, which is quickly losing its status as one of the best in the nation, and an antiquated HR computing system that uses COBOL and urgently needs a \$15 million upgrade. We are also facing transit costs that include \$82 million in capital upgrades that are overdue now plus an additional \$28 million in annual operating costs starting within the next five years.

As we move forward to address our budget challenges it is important to understand how we got here so we can avoid past mistakes. It was not just the pension scandal that got us into this situation. Previous county governments felt we could do more with less, and adopted a principle of paying for things with bonding rather than raising taxes. This is like charging our costs to a credit card, which charges us interest we will have to pay down in the future, essentially leaving it to our children to pay for their parent's expenses.

I found the willingness to put things on a credit card a shockingly prevalent attitude, especially when you considered that Wisconsinites have the highest rate of paying off our credit card balances in the nation. As most people know, only making the minimum payment on your credit card only delays future pain. Well the future for Milwaukee County is now, and we have to find a way to pay off our bills.

As a fiscally responsible Supervisor, I believe strongly that government has an obligation to provide essential public services but to ensure that they are paid for in a responsible way.

Between the structural imbalance in our budget and deferred maintenance in our parks, we are in serious trouble. This year, Milwaukee County government had a choice of either burying our heads in the sand and refusing to accept the reality of our challenges, or start to make some tough choices and generate new revenue that could start to address our financial troubles.

The Wisconsin Legislature has limited the tools available to Milwaukee County government for generating revenue. The sales tax and property tax levy are capped, user fees are already high, and more bonding (the credit card) is a bad option. The only tool Governor Scott Walker and Legislative Republicans have told us that we can use is a vehicle registration fee (VRF), or wheel tax.

County Executive Abele wanted a \$60 wheel tax. Although a \$60 wheel tax would have brought in money to address a lot of our needs, it was too much, too soon. We have to do more belt-tightening. A \$30 wheel tax only generates about \$13.5 million, a fraction of what is needed, but it's a start.

The wheel tax was supported by the Milwaukee Manufacturers and Commerce, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the Public Policy Forum, the County comptroller, and a variety of community groups. This spring, voters will have an opportunity to vote on the \$60 wheel tax in a non-binding referendum.

My fellow supervisors and I listened to our constituents and we not only cut the proposed \$60 wheel tax in half, but we also cut spending by \$13.5 million, and reduced the County Executive's proposed property tax increase. I personally offered amendments to the County Executive's budget that cut thousands of dollars from the budget, such as dropping unnecessary memberships to organizations, and cutting non-essential services. There will be more cuts to come. Due to a lack of user fees the transit system left a hole in the budget, which I proposed to address through new revenue in user fees from our parks and cultural institutions.

Looking ahead, I am very concerned about Milwaukee County's future ability to pay our legacy obligations and for essential services, to fund capital projects and investments in our future. One major cost coming up is the Mitchell Park Domes. The cost to rebuild or replace is a daunting task when they only bring in about 56% of their operating costs. (The Domes bring in \$1,018,000 in revenue and cost \$1,800,000 to operate.) We have to ask tough questions like whether we are willing to make a [\\$14-\\$64 million investment](#) in the Mitchell Park Domes or put that money somewhere else. This question should be put to you, the voters, with a binding referendum in the near future.

I appreciate your support and help in evaluating our choices and making decisions about our future. I truly need your input and your questions as I grapple with these problems, which are on my mind every day. Please send me your email address so I can include you in this process.

As we go forward I plan on putting these questions to you and asking for you to weigh in on specific projects in our neighborhoods. So your input will be very important for my decision making. I believe very strongly in direct representation of the people, and your opinions will certainly affect my vote.